

Tempted by a dead deer on the roadside? Better think twice

By Scott Hammer
The Bulletin

BEND (AP) — With the season of feasting and family dinners on the horizon, it's a safe bet one dish will be missing from most menus — roadkill.

Oregon bans the harvesting of most animals you might strike with your car yet still consider eating, unlike nearly a third of states, where the fender-to-frying pan journey is one possible path for the victim of an unforeseen collision.

In Oregon, game animals killed by a vehicle cannot be harvested, by the driver or anyone else. Antlers from deer or elk killed by a vehicle cannot be harvested either. The law, according to the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife website, is intended to discourage individuals from "hunting" with their vehicle.

On the other hand, any motorist who kills a nonprotected animal — or just happens to find it along the road — is free to take it home. Qualifying species include coyote, skunk, nutria, opossum, badger, porcupine and weasel, and anything else that can be hunted without a license or tag, reports *The (Bend) Bulletin*.

There's also a third category that applies to individuals licensed to trap animals for their fur. They can take home bobcat, gray fox and red fox, marten, muskrat,

mink, raccoon, river otter and beaver, but only when such animals are in season.

Cory Heath, wildlife biologist with the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife, said Oregon's laws on harvesting roadkill date back decades. In large part, the rules against keeping game animals killed by vehicles are designed to deter illegal or out-of-season hunting, he said. By banning the collection of roadkill, poachers can't cover up their activity by claiming to have struck the animal accidentally, Heath said.

Heath said a scattering of Oregonians are caught illegally harvesting roadkill every year, though often, not for the meat.

"In many cases, they are people taking antlers off buck deer and bull elk, people taking bear paws off roadkilled bears, things like that," he said.

Harvesting of the smaller animals in the nonprotected category is quite rare, Heath said.

"You see what the critters look like after they get run over on the road, and most of them are probably not in a very usable condition," he said.

Peter Murphy, regional spokesman for the Oregon Department of Transportation, said the period between early October and mid-November is the deadliest time of year for local deer venturing onto

the road in Central Oregon.

Deer that make their home near Bend and in the Cascades during summer often move toward Christmas Valley for the winter, Murphy said, necessitating trips through populated areas and across busy highways. For whatever reason, far fewer tend to be struck by vehicles when making the return trip in the spring.

Bend is on the northern edge of a zone extending past La Pine that sees more collisions between deer and vehicles than anywhere else in the state, Murphy said.

"Central Oregon is a hot spot, and that is perhaps the hottest hot spot in the state for collisions. We get deer everywhere around here," he said.

The fencing that went up along both sides of U.S. Highway 97 between Bend and Sunriver in 2012 to funnel deer and other animals though a designated crossing near Lava Butte have been successful, Murphy said. Between 2004 and 2006, ODOT recorded 42 instances in which vehicles struck and killed deer, but Murphy said since the fencing went up, only two deer have been killed in that stretch. A new project that would extend the fencing further south and add new crossings is in the planning stages, he said.

Oregon's rules on keeping what you run over are tighter than in many states,

including Washington, which adopted a roadkill salvage law that went into effect in July.

Under the Washington law, drivers who strike and kill a deer or elk can take it home, and have 24 hours to obtain a salvage permit — a deer or elk tag does not suffice. Drivers are further forbidden from killing an animal injured in a collision for the purpose of harvesting the meat or antlers.

Whether you should or would want to eat an animal killed by a vehicle is another question.

Bob Mehan, owner at Cinder Butte Meat Co. in Redmond, said it's common when processing legitimately hunted deer and elk to discard the "blood shot" portion of the meat, the tissues that are bruised and damaged by the path of a bullet. Bruising on an animal struck by a car would likely be much more extensive, he said.

Mehan said an injured

animal will generate a surge of adrenaline, which can degrade the taste of its meat and is often cited as among the drawbacks of consuming roadkill.

Still, Mehan said he'd expect a similar adrenaline surge would be taking place when a hunter wounds an animal, then tracks it for hours before delivering the fatal shot. Perhaps, he said, the excitement of harvesting one's own meal allows a successful hunter to ignore any off flavors.

Murphy said ODOT has tried and failed to find takers for animals killed along the road. Wildlife rescue facilities that keep animals that might otherwise enjoy a carcass have turned down ODOT, he said, for fear of potentially introducing disease. Instead, carcasses collected by ODOT are typically dragged a distance away from the road, he said, and left to scavengers to do the rest.

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